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ABSTRACT

Today, while secular society has opened up a new range of roles and psychological expectations to women, the status and life of Orthodox Jewish women remain circumscribed by Jewish religious law. Orthodox women face inequality in four areas: in the synagogue and participation in prayer; in religious education; in legal areas such as status in religious courts and divorce proceedings; and in communal leadership. When confronted with criticism, Orthodox religious spokespersons resort to apologetics and defensiveness. The result is resistance by some Orthodox Jewish women, anger among many, and confusion in the minds of nearly all. Eventually, some turn to psychotherapy for help in resolving the conflict between the traditional world of the home and synagogue and the attractions and pressures of the secular world. Feminist therapy is particularly well-equiped to address such issues as: (1) helping the Orthodox woman patient to understand that change is possible even within the confines of religious law, and that traditional social and sexual roles need not inhibit the feminist objective of enabling each woman to realize her own individual and unique potential; (2) focusing treatment toward action rather than introspection; (3) enabling women hwo have traditionally seen themselves as powerless to accept power and responsibility for themselves; and (4) helping the woman to examine previously unquestioned roles and stereotypes, thus changing her perceptions by heightening her consciousness. (Author)

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TORAH-TRUE AND FEMINIST TOO:

A PSYCHOTHERAPIST'S VIEW OF THE CONFLICT

BETWEEN ORTHODOX JUDAISM AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

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Aphrodite Clamar, Ph.D.

"May she sew, spin, weave, and be brought up to a life of good deeds." Such is the prayer which a pious father inscribed, on the birth of a baby girl, in an old Hebrew book which was used as the family register. This prayer sums up the ideal of womanhood as cherished by the Orthodox Jewish parents of a new-born daughter. The end-all of her education was to make the girl into a competent housewife and, at the same time, to build within her a character that would fit her for a life of "good deeds."

Today, while secular society has opened up a new range of roles and psychological expectations to women, the status and life of Orthodox Jewish women remain circumscribed by Jewish religious law. Orthodox women face inequality in four areas: (1) the synagogue and in participation in prayer; (2) religious education; (3) legal areas such as status in the religious courts and divorce proceedings; and (4) communal leadership. When confronted with criticism, Orthodox religious spokespersons often resort to apologetics and defensiveness. The result is resistance by some Orthodox Jewish women, anger, and confusion in the minds of many.

The Women's Movement, the most profound, bloodless revolution in

modern history, has challenged traditions, mores and vested interests with a depth and intensity never before felt. Its major impact has been to raise social consciousness, initiate social change and question the ways in which men and women relate to one another in all spheres of their lives -- be it school, work, or within the family.

In the Orthodox Jewish community, which has always considered the woman and the family as the essential link in the continuity and transmission of Jewish identity, what happens to the family -- and especially what happens to women -- has tremendous implications. The social changes brought about by the Women's Movement are here to stay; and families (in spite of all their faults) are likely to continue as our most basic socializing institution. However, changes in how women view themselves and their roles will have a crucial impact on the family.

In recent decades, therapists and family counselors have been in the forefront of those professionals who are available to help women cope with, fit into, and articulate their roles within a changing society. Slowly, Orthodox Jewish women are turning to psychotherapy for help in resolving the conflict between the traditional world of the home and synagogue, with its prescribed limits and proscribed behaviors, and the secular world, where the new status and the new opportunities created by the feminist revolution may be found, tried and even enjoyed. Perhaps most importantly for them, they are asking for reassessment and change in their ritual participation within Judaism -- asking for <u>more</u> opportunities to fulfill themselves as Jews and women -- not less. Thus, the Orthodox women who are engaged in this movement -- a small but growing number -- are working for change not by rejecting their tradition but by seeking to modify it; not by attacking Jewish law but by trying to amend it; not by repudiating

custom but by altering it; not by turning their backs on Jewish life but by attempting to enter it.

The target of these Orthodox women is Judaism's traditional sex-role differentiation, which cites halachic (religious) factors for excluding women from entire spheres of the Jewish experience. The problems Orthodox women face in relation to their traditions are deep and complex. Thus Halachah (the laws and regulations of the Talmud which govern all aspects of Jewish life and resppnsibility), the Jewish family structure, and their own socialization all become obstacles in the Orthodox woman's quest for self-actualization and full membership within her religion. Many Orthodox women are trying to sort out the difference between halachic considerations and those that have been superimposed by the secular culture.

Orthodox men define themselves through a wide and highly respected set of activities within the synagogue and community; women, on the contrary, are defined in socio-biological terms as wife and mother and relegated almost exclusively to home and family life. Women are encouraged and socialized to concern themselves with serving, nurturing and homemaking. They are exempt from particular, revered mitzvot (obligations, not options) because of their family responsibilities, even though it is possible to share these responsibilities with their husbands, and they may have more free time than their working husbands to fulfill the mitzvot. Nevertheless, because they are not required by Halachah to participate in communal prayer three times a day, Orthodox Jewish women do not count towards a minyan (quorum necessary for a prayer service) nor can they lead a service. Within the

family, women may have a necessary, even noble role, but the soul of traditional Judaism is communal are prayer, sacred study and ritual obligation -- pursuits open almost exclusively to men. As Paula Hyman has observed, "the synagogue is a 'men's club,' perhaps the most ancient in history."[1]

Within the frame-work of Orthodox Judaism women lack certain legal rights. They cannot serve as witnesses in a Jewish court (they are considered unreliable); they do not inherit equally with men; they are passive figures in the wedding ceremony where they are "consecrated unto their husbands;" and they cannot initiate divorce proceedings. Although communal pressures may be applied to force a husband to give his wife a divorce, these safeguards have been known to fail, and many a woman has had to wait, powerless, while he controlled her fate and future. Over the centuries, too, the ancient awe, fear, repugnance and mythology that characterized male attitudes toward female sexuality, menstruation and birthing were intricately woven into the Jewish experience and Halakhah. Thus woman became the temptress, the potential entrapper of even the most pious man. In a reversal of roles, male lust was assigned to women, who then had to be controlled -- lest they lead man away from God -- by imposing rigid standards of behavior between men and women, by strict standards of modesty and dress and by seating them in specially designated areas in the synagogue behind a mechitza (screen) where their presence would not distract the men from prayer.

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1. Paula Hyman, "Is It Kosher to be Feminist?" Ms, July 1974, p. 76.

In Feminists for Judaism,[2] Sheila F. Segal refers to the impact of the emotion-laden issue of the mechitza for both sexes:

> To many men it is a demarcation of the domain in which they reign; to many women it is a symbol of their own inferior status, for it usually relegates them to the back or kicks them upstairs to the grandstands....The real problem is not the mechitza itself but the attitudes it symbolizes and nurtures: that the spiritual activity of women is not as important as that of men, that they are irrelevant to the service, and that they must be kept apart because of woman's monthly uncleanness....The assumption that a woman could "contaminate" the Torah has prevailed for centuries, despite the fact that the Torah cannot be defiled by any human contact.
>
> Such distortions have had insidious effects -- first teaching women to feel disgust over their own bodily functions and ultimately leading them to reject the tradition that nurtures such attitudes.

Ms. Segal goes on to note that "most men have virtually no accurate perception of the issues involved today, or even of the reasons why women have been excluded over the centuries."

Resolving the conflict between the new social order, with its emphasis on self-fulfillment, and the Orthodox Jewish conceptions of legal relationships and responsibilities will not be easy. Today, increasing numbers of Orthodox wives are working outside the home and there is a concomitant trend toward greater husband participation in home and child care. Aileen Cohen Nusbacher at Brooklyn College, who examined the attitudes and life-styles of a group of 30 middle-class Orthodox women committed to both motherhood and career goals, found that the women she studied succeeded not by minimizing the conflict or by compartmentalizing roles but rather because "they were determined in their aspirations, encouraged by their husbands, had mothers as models for working, and were urged to achieve academically."

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2. Sheila F. Segal, "Feminists for Judaism," Midstream, August/September 1975, Vol. XXI, No. 7, p. 62.

"The satisfactions derived from work and achievement," Ms. Nusbacher found, "reinforced the desire to continue, and these women seem able to function effectively in a profession, and as mothers and wives."[3]

All the women in the study experienced role strain; some felt guilty, others did not; many "felt bad" when they left their children to go to work; some found the special responsibilities of Jewish tradition difficult; all, however, were able to meet the challenge of dual roles. Eighteen of the 30 women indicated that women's liberation made them feel better about their professional roles and tempered their guilt over leaving their children in order to fulfill themselves.

Even in families where Orthodox women do not work, they often have more free time than ever before; and, in varying degrees, they are exposed to the influences of the secular world and the effects of the Women's Movement. They no longer accept inequalities, comfortable though the status quo might be after centuries of conditioning.

Thus, the Orthodox Jewish woman who seeks psychotherapy today does so because what she sees and hears in the world outside challenges what she has been taught to believe. Feminist psychotherapy is particularly well-equipped to deal with these issues. The Orthodox Jewish woman who seeks to initiate change in her life through the process of psychotherapy presents many of the same basic problems as any other woman seeking help -- a desire to strengthen her conception of herself; a wish to improve the myriad layers of her "personna" within her unique social-communal world, and the recognition of her worthiness as a woman and person.

But in addition to these fundamental needs, which the great majority of women in psychotherapy seek to fulfill, the Orthodox woman needs

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3. Aileen Cohen Nusbacher, "The Orthodox Professional Jewish Woman," M.A. Thesis in the Department of Sociology, Brooklyn College, January, 1977.

special help. She will need to gain the inner strength to challenge the assumptions and expectations which curtail her self-realization; to work creatively and positively for change within the confines of Halakhah; she will need to develop an ability to assert unpopular, if not heretical, notions effectively and persuasively; she will need to feel comfortable with direct action rather than introspection; she will need to learn how to change power relationships within the family and within marriage, and she will need to attain the confidence necessary to challenge previously unquestioned roles and stereotypes in the light of changing perceptions and consciousness.

Above all, the feminist therapist must be sensitive to the wide variety of needs and expectations that the Orthodox Jewish woman's heritage brings. For example, I have as a patient an older divorced Orthodox Jewish woman who, after two years of treatment, is still struggling between assuming responsibility for her life and depending on her older brothers to supplement her income and rent. The real struggle is between her life as she was raised to expect it to be, with her husband or older brothers providing for her, and the depression and shame she feels because she cannot meet her own expectations of independence and self-reliance. She resents and is humiliated by her need for help; at the same time she sees it as her due, as something she was brought up to accept, as a condition of life itself. Of course, many divorced women with only limited means feel resentful at their dependency and at those on whom they are dependent. I am suggesting here that this patient's Orthodox upbringing has created an additional conflict that must be worked through in the therapeutic process.

Viewed in the context of the generations of history and traditions of Orthodox Judaism, the Women's Movement is a recent development; but the

inner needs and conflicts which inspired it are not. Thus, the feminist therapist faces the challenge of reconciling her commitment to the dignity of her patient -- including her heritage, beliefs and customs -- with an allegiance to the Women's Movement's principles of liberation and growth. The clash is between secular and religious values. It is important that the therapist be sensitive to this clash and understand its effect on her patient's life. In the act of achieving this reconciliation, the feminist therapist offers the best opportunity to the Orthodox Jewish woman patient for achieving her potential as an individual and a member of her religious community.

* * * *

This paper has addressed itself to the needs of the Orthodox Jewish woman as I have experienced them in my practice and associations. However, the issues it raises in reference to women who are subject to religious attitudes which inhibit their personal growth and fulfillment are equally applicable, I feel, to other strongly traditional groups -- be they Eastern Orthodox, Fundamentalist Protestant, Mormon, Catholic or Islamic. Historically, religions have been interpreted by men in ways that are detrimental to women, that justify their lower socio-economic status, and protest men from accountability. Misused and misapplied, religion has traditionally kept women in the yoke of second-class citizenship in the name of God and faith. I strongly feel that this is an area of concern to feminist therapists who need to be ever-alert to these influences in the lives of their patients, who must be effective in highlighting them, and creative in helping their patients confront and overcome them.

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